

Press Release

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## ***U.S. Official Outlines Full Agenda for Western Hemisphere***

### **Says U.S. will work to strengthen regional democracies, economies**

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Washington -- The United States has a very full agenda for the Western Hemisphere and will work multilaterally with its regional partners to strengthen democratic institutions and generate economic growth in the Americas, according to Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega.

In a November 15 interview with the Washington File, Noriega outlined the United States' hemispheric priorities as the Bush administration prepares to enter its second term. He expounded on ongoing efforts in the hemisphere, including the implementation of Summit of the Americas mandates, the advancement of the hemispheric trade agenda, the reconstruction of the hurricane-ravaged nations of the Caribbean, Andean counternarcotics cooperation, and an immigration accord with Mexico.

U.S. policy for the hemisphere, Noriega pointed out, aims to strengthen democratic institutions and generate economic growth in the region. To these ends, he said that the United States and its hemispheric partners have a "very full agenda ahead of us."

To advance this agenda, the assistant secretary indicated that the United States will continue to engage the region through the multilateral mechanisms of the Organization of American States (OAS) and Summit of the Americas process.

He noted that the plans of action crafted and implemented as a result of the various summits and related fora are multilateral plans reached by consensus after negotiation among all 34 free countries of the Americas.

One of the practical plans of action that hemispheric leaders agreed to at the January Special Summit of the Americas in Monterrey, Mexico, was to develop report cards for regional education systems so that countries could measure the effectiveness of their education investment.

Noriega said that the region is making "considerable progress" on this front. He explained that the initiative "is a lesson, really, on how effective the Summit process can be" in that it challenges a country to do a better job in certain areas while the United States provides technical assistance and other forms of support to help nations meet these challenges.

Another commitment that regional leaders made at the Special Summit of the Americas was to make HIV/AIDS anti-retroviral treatment available to approximately 600,000 individuals in the hemisphere who need it by 2005. Noriega indicated that the region has met this goal and will consider setting future goals.

Other commitments that hemispheric leaders made in Monterrey included substantially reducing the amount of time it takes to start a business, increasing credit available to the private sector -- particularly small and medium-sized enterprises -- and making it easier for individuals to register private property and get titles to their land.

Noriega said that progress is being made on all these fronts, and that continued progress on the commitments made at the Special Summit of the Americas is important because it will provide an important foundation for the 2005 Summit of the Americas in Argentina.

He noted that the theme of the 2005 summit will be "Creating Jobs and Generating Economic Growth." Noriega said that commitments to education, extending credit, and securing property rights are all important building blocks for the sustainable job creation that regional leaders envision.

As part of continued U.S. engagement with the OAS and Summit of the Americas process, he said the United States will host the OAS General Assembly in June 2005 and President Bush will travel to the 2005 Summit of the Americas in Argentina.

### **ECONOMIC GROWTH, TRADE ISSUES**

As the United States works multilaterally toward the broad goals of strengthening democracy and economic growth in the hemisphere, some individual issues merit urgent attention, Noriega said.

Citing the 40 percent of the hemisphere's people who live in poverty as "a high priority for the United States," he indicated that greater U.S. attention to their plight will be forthcoming.

"I think in the second [Bush] term, we will give even more emphasis on the things that governments have to do for themselves to help people overcome poverty and contribute to the greater good," Noriega said.

He said that the United States will also continue working to advance the hemispheric trade agenda, particularly the creation of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

"We have put a lot of work into the FTAA because we think a region-wide accord is the best thing for all the countries in the Americas," he said. "It is important not only that they have access to our market and we have access to theirs, but it is important that we lower barriers across the board."

Noriega acknowledged that differences on agricultural policies have slowed progress on the FTAA thus far. Nonetheless, he said, "I don't give up hope, by any means, that we will reach that regional accord."

In the meantime, Noriega noted that the United States has in place -- or continues working toward -- bilateral trade agreements with much of the hemisphere. These bilateral trade agreements, he said, represent building blocks toward the FTAA.

One of these building blocks is the U.S. trade agreement with the Dominican Republic and the Central American nations of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua (DR-CAFTA). If approved by Congress, the DR-CAFTA would create the second-largest free-trade zone in Latin America for U.S. exports.

Noriega lauded the trade accord as a good agreement: "We have to note that stability in Central America and economic growth in Central America -- consolidation of democratic, open, free-market governments in that region -- has inherent benefit."

The approval of the DR-CAFTA, Noriega said, will unfortunately be "sorely complicated" by the Dominican Republic's decision to impose a tax on U.S. products with high-fructose corn syrup.

He indicated that the United States is trying to address the issue and predicted that once it is resolved, the accord will likely be presented to the U.S. Congress for consideration in early 2005. The prospects for approval of the accord, he said, are "probably pretty good."

Another bilateral building block under construction is the U.S.-Andean Free Trade Agreement currently being negotiated between the United States, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. Noriega said that a lot of work remains to be done in these negotiations, but he expressed hope that an agreement will be reached and presented for congressional approval in 2005.

Bolivia is currently participating in the U.S.-Andean trade talks as an observer. Noriega said it will be difficult to fold Bolivia into the agreement, given the complexity of the political considerations involved. In view of these considerations, Noriega indicated that the United States may suggest that Bolivia remain an observer to the talks, because the issues that Bolivia could bring to the table might be more than the negotiations will bear.

#### INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

Elsewhere in South America, Noriega said that the recent election of leftist leader Tabare Vazquez as president of Uruguay does not augur poorly for U.S. relations with that nation, nor do the elections of leftist governments elsewhere in the region hinder U.S. policy.

He pointed out that even though there are unique leftist elements within Vazquez's Broad Front coalition, there are also more moderate elements. Noriega said it is important to note that the coalition has pursued power through the ballot box.

"This is a movement that has competed for power democratically, repeatedly, so their democratic commitment is something that can't be questioned," he said. "I think that it is important that Uruguay's neighbors work with whatever government the Uruguayan people elect democratically."

Noriega noted that there are a number of other countries in South America that have chosen leftist leaders without undermining in any way relations with the United States. "We have demonstrated our eagerness, not just our willingness, to work with those leaders, so I don't think it presents a problem," he said.

Noriega also noted that the United States works hard to have normal, respectful relations with all countries of the Americas.

He said that this has always been the U.S. objective in its dealings with Venezuela, and this goal did not change with the election of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in 1998. Unfortunately, relations have sometimes been difficult, Noriega said, due to Chavez's penchant for pronouncements that undermine mutual confidence.

Noriega expressed hope that this will change. In the meantime, he said the United States would like to see progress with Venezuela in areas such as combating trafficking in persons, narcotics and terrorism.

The assistant secretary said that it is essential for Venezuela to cooperate with its neighbors to achieve these ends, but he cautioned that progress on these issues "is no substitute for Venezuela meeting its broader commitments to democracy, freedom of expression and respect for human rights."

#### THE CARIBBEAN

As the U.S. monitors the respect for democratic institutions in Venezuela, it will also continue to advocate their development in Haiti.

Noriega said that Haiti has suffered from decades of mismanagement and predatory rule and deserves good government.

He noted that there is a tremendous amount of international support for Haiti, as evidenced by the more than \$1.3 billion in committed assistance and the presence of United Nations peacekeepers there, led by Brazil.

Present priorities in Haiti, Noriega said, include efforts to enhance security, facilitate economic recovery and begin preparations for 2005 elections in the Caribbean country. He added that although the devastation wrought by Hurricane Jeanne in September disrupted these international efforts, the political elements in Haiti that sought to take advantage of this disruption to foment upheaval and violence have failed.

"We are getting back on track now," Noriega said.

Hurricane recovery efforts will continue to be an important component of U.S. and international efforts in Haiti, but these efforts will not be limited to Haiti. The United States announced November 10 a \$100 million hurricane recovery program to help Caribbean nations hardest hit by Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne.

The Caribbean countries primarily targeted under this program are Grenada, Haiti and Jamaica. Noriega pointed out that Grenada will receive \$42 million, Haiti \$38 million, and Jamaica \$18 million. The United States will disperse these hurricane recovery funds in the course of the next 12 months.

#### NARCO-TERRORISM

President Bush will have an opportunity to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to combat narco-terrorism in the Andean region more immediately during a November 22 visit to Cartagena, Colombia.

"The United States strongly supports the efforts of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and his commitment to the Colombian people to fight the narco-terrorist groups that threaten South America's oldest democracy," Noriega said.

He pointed out that the Uribe administration, with U.S. support, has made considerable progress in extending the rule of law, disrupting the drug trade, and confronting Colombia's illegal armed groups.

Noriega said Colombia's Andean neighbors have also helped "like never before" to combat narco-terrorism, but he challenged them to do more to ensure that as illicit activity is disrupted in Colombia, it does not escalate elsewhere in the Andes.

To this end, he said the United States will continue to work with Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru to increase their capacity to confront these criminal elements and to ensure sustained progress in combating narco-terrorism in the region.

"We think it is a success story," Noriega said. "The next four years gives us an opportunity to continue cooperation and make a very meaningful dent in the drug trade."

#### MEXICO, CANADA

Noriega said that the Bush administration hopes that its next four years also allow for a significant immigration agreement with Mexico.

Following the November 9 U.S.-Mexico Binational Commission meeting in Mexico City, Mexico, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge announced that immigration reform with Mexico would be a high priority during the Bush administration's second term.

Noriega said that an immigration accord with Mexico not only makes economic sense, but is also the "humane and just thing do."

He said the White House commitment to advancing an accord is in place, and progress will depend on congressional consultations. "We will work with the U.S. Congress to see how ambitious we can be and how quickly we can move," Noriega said.

The State Department official said the United States will also work with Mexico, as well as Canada, to explore ways to break down barriers to commerce.

He noted that since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States has worked closely with its two North American neighbors and largest trading partners to bolster border security while also facilitating the continued efficient flow of commerce and people.

Moving forward, Noriega said that the United States, Mexico and Canada "will look for ways to stay out in front and grow together."

As the Bush administration prepares to address all the aforementioned hemispheric issues in the course of the next four years, it would appear the United States indeed does have a very full agenda for the Americas.